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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 003536

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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/ARP, INR/NESA, DRL, S/P

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SUBJECT: (C) POLITICAL ISLAM WORKING GROUP: KUWAIT SNAPSHOT

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1. (C) This cable responds to reftel request for "brief thumbnail descriptions" of Kuwait's "most influential or prominent Islamist political parties, NGO's, individuals or university campus activist groups." Formal political parties are not permitted in Kuwait, but de facto parties exist, and those with the strongest identity tend to be Islamist. The most significant of the Sunni movements are:

- The Islamic Constitutional Movement: the political arm of the (Sunni) Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait. ICM was the strongest Islamist grouping in the National Assembly until the July 5 elections, when it suffered major losses. The reasons for this debacle are not yet clear, and may have a lot to do with the nature of the balloting: single-round, first-two-past-the-post in each of 25 constituencies, in which it is possible to be elected with fewer than one thousand votes. Prominent ICM'ers include Chairman Issa Majed al-Shaheen and MPs Dr. Nasser al-Sane, Mikhlid al-Azmi and Mohammed al-Bossairi. ICM MPs who failed to win reelection were Mubarak al-Duwaila, Mubarak Snaidih, and Abdullah al-Arada. The Social Reform Society (jam'iyat al-islah al-ijtima'i) is the social welfare arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, and is widely regarded in Kuwait as a reputable charity. Nonetheless, its affiliate Lajnat al-da'wa al-islamiya (LDI) was placed on the UN's terrorist finance list at the request of France; ICM denies the charge and has lobbied the French and US embassies to clear LDI's name.

- The Salafi Call (al-da'wa al-salafiya), aka The (Traditional) Salafis: strict Sunnis heavily influenced by the Saudi Wahhabi brand of Islam. Generally seen as more hard-line than ICM, but there is some overlap: Salafis claim that many ICM members are increasingly following the Salafi way. This bloc portrays itself as D (willing to engage in a democratic, pluralistic process and respect the rights of others as well as the principle of alternance of governance) but its opponents view it as C (willing to engage in a democratic, pluralistic process but, if given full power, would not respect the rights of non-Islamists, secularists, and/or minorities). Minister of Justice Ahmed Baqer is a Salafi; until this month, he also held the Awqaf and Islamic Affairs portfolio. Baqer was elected to the National Assembly under the banner of the Popular Islamic Grouping, along with Dr. Fahd al-Khanna and Jassem al-Kandari (Note: Kandari is also variously described as Independent and Scientific Salafi). MPs Dr. Adel al-Sar'awi, Faisal al-Msallam, and Dr. Dhaifallah Bou Ramya, nominally Independent, are seen as being Salafis (Sar'awi and Msallam enjoyed the support of ICM as well). Ahmed al-Duaij lost his reelection bid. The social welfare arm of this movement is the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS, jam'iyat ahiya al-turath al-islami), widely regarded in Kuwait as a reputable charity. Its chairman Tareq al-Issa eschews politics, though his predecessor Khaled Sultan al-Issa is politically engaged. RIHS's Pakistan branch and Afghanistan project office, now both defunct, were placed on the UN's terrorist finance list more than one year ago; the parent organization disavows any knowledge of improper use of funds.

- The Salafi Movement (al-haraka al-salafiya), aka The Scientific Salafis: a hard-line offshoot of the Salafi Call. Its Secretary-General Dr. Hakem al-Mutairi faces criminal charges for falsely complaining of GOK torture of Kuwaitis returned from Afghanistan. Other prominent Scientific Salafis include MPs Dr. Waleed al-Tabtabaei, Dr. Awad Barad al-Enezi, Abdullah Akkash. Kuwait University professor Dr. Abdul-Razzaq al-Shaiji told Pol Chief last fall that he condemned attacks on Americans in Kuwait but preached jihad against the American forces in Afghanistan, and made no secret of his admiration for the Taliban.

SIPDIS

2. (C) About a third of Kuwaitis are Shia. Some are very liberal, but four Shiite Islamists were elected to the new National Assembly: Dr. Hassan Jowhar, Saleh Ashour, Yousef al-Zalzala, Salah Khorshid (Trade and Industry Minister in the last Cabinet) and Hussein al-Qallaf, a sayyed (descendant of the Prophet Mohammed) who wears the distinctive black

turban. Ashour and Zalzal are viewed as "independent/government leaning." Khorshid was Minister of Commerce in the previous government and generally responsive to US requests. Shiite MPs who failed to win reelection were Adnan Abdul-Samad and Abdul-Mohsen Jamal. Shiite Islamists dismiss allegations that they belong to Kuwaiti Hizballah, saying the only real Hizballah is in Lebanon. Kuwaiti Shiites have by all accounts lost their enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution and reacted to the Iraqi occupation by gaining a greater sense of being Kuwaitis first. Although overt discrimination against Shia is less pronounced in Kuwait than in some other Gulf States, they still have their grievances. For example, there is no independent Shia Awqaf. There is also no Shiite seminary in Kuwait; would-be clerics must travel to Qom in Iran or Najaf in Iraq; the latter opportunity did not exist for the past twelve years, but the liberation of Iraq has changed that.

13. (C) Kuwait is a rich country; we do not believe that external funding plays any significant role in any of the above Islamist groups, with the possible exception of Shiites, some of whom clearly have ties to the Iranian regime. All of the above groups portray themselves as falling under refel category D (willing to engage in a democratic, pluralistic process and respect the rights of others as well as the principle of alternance of governance), but their opponents say they all really fall under category C (willing to engage in a democratic, pluralistic process but, if given full power, would not respect the rights of non-Islamists, secularists, and/or minorities). All have shown willingness to form tactical alliances with those who do not share many of their views, in order to achieve a particular shared purpose. In theory, all oppose the existence of the State of Israel, and most (at least the Sunnis) oppose political rights for women. To varying degrees, and with some exceptions, expressed significant reservations to the US invading Arab/Muslim Iraq, though they loathed Saddam's regime. (One notable exception was Khaled Sultan al-Issa, former Chairman of RIHS and a prominent Traditional Salafi: having been imprisoned and tortured by the Iraqis during the 1990-91 occupation, he had no problem with the idea of American infidels destroying Saddam's regime by force.) All profess to accept the legitimacy of the Kuwaiti regime and the presence of US forces in Kuwait as invited guests and protectors. That said, they are deeply suspicious of US pressure for western-style reforms, and can be expected to try to delegitimize any attempted reforms -- even if we have nothing to do with them -- on grounds that we are trying to impose our alien ways.

14. (C) A few Kuwaitis, numbering perhaps several hundred, are actively hostile to the US presence in Kuwait. They tend to cluster around Kuwaitis who went to Afghanistan to support the Taliban regime and/or receive training from al-Qaeda. An influential figure for these (Sunni) extremists is the minor cleric Jaber al-Jalahma; he was arrested after allegedly praising as martyrs the terrorists who killed US Marine Lance Cpl. Antonio Sledd in October 2002. That attack shocked the Kuwaiti government and public, and led to an energetic investigation by the security services.

15. (C) There are no pre-eminent Islamic religious leaders in Kuwait. Salafis look primarily to Saudi Arabia for guidance, but have not yet settled on a single spiritual leader since the death of prominent Saudi Aalim Shaykh Bin Baz. The most respected Sunni cleric in Kuwait may be Dr. Ajeel al-Neshmi, who was the first to condemn the murder of Sledd as forbidden by Islam. He eschews politics and has declined to meet with Emboffs. The young Dean of the Faculty of Sharia at Kuwait University, Dr. Mohammed al-Tabtabaei, took the initiative to organize seminars to explain proper Islamic teaching in the aftermath of the Sledd killing, and did meet with Emboffs, but stressed that he was doing so at risk to his reputation.

16. (C) A number of Islamists who have studied in the West are adept at presenting themselves and their agenda in positive terms. In all cases that we have encountered, however, they start from a different premise than we do: theirs is not a pluralistic society, but a Muslim one, and their goal is for Kuwait to adhere more closely to the tenets of Islam as they understand it. Perhaps the most open-minded Islamist figure we have met here is Dr. Ayyoub Khaled al-Ayyoub, Secretary General of the Higher Consultative Committee for the Finalization of the Application of the Provisions of the Islamic Sharia (part of the Amiri Diwan). Dr. Ayyoub studied in the US and England; he gives regular talks on the radio, and in one that we heard, he described instances in which the non-Muslim British displayed "true Islamic behavior" by their honesty and neighborliness.

17. (C) Ever since the naturalization in the 1970s of large numbers of Bedouin, Kuwaiti society has become more insular and conservative -- fertile ground for the Islamists. Kuwait's dependence on the US for protection against Saddam, along with its role as the launching pad for Operation Iraqi Freedom, has led to charges from other Arabs that it has

betrayed its Arab and Muslim identity. Kuwaitis at all levels are clearly sensitive to such allegations which lead to a feeling of cognitive dissonance on the part of all but the most Westernized. The more the US role in the region and the world seems overwhelmingly dominant, the more we can expect Kuwaitis to assert/defend their identity in contrast to us; almost by definition, the most socially acceptable way for them to do so is to show Islamic fervor.

18. (C) By regional standards, there is a great deal of freedom in Kuwait. The privately-owned press is vocal and often criticizes the government; the same can be said of the National Assembly. While not formally recognized as parties, a number of political blocs do exist. Unity of perspective and of agenda is perhaps easier for Islamists to achieve than for secular liberals, who range from Marxists and Pan-Arabists to pro-American free-marketeers. A major challenge for the US in the months and years ahead will be to avoid being perceived as the common enemy against which Islamists and other conservative forces can unite.

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